

The Plague of Doves Study Guide

The Plague of Doves by Louise Erdrich

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of the novel, this study guide specifically refers to the 2009 First Harper Perennial paperback edition. Quotes and references in this study guide refer to page numbers rather than paragraphs.

"The Plague of Doves" is a spiritual novel occurring over the course of the last five decade by Louise Erdrich. "The Plague of Doves" recounts the lives, misfortunes, and choices of the citizens of Pluto, North Dakota, all revolving around an old, unsolved murder. The reader should also note in advance that the structure of the novel recounts events, both past and present, as if they were occurring simultaneously. This requires close reading to ensure that events are properly understood in their context.

The novel opens through the eyes of half-white, half-Native American girl Evelina Harp, who recounts her family's deep roots not only in the area around Pluto, but in Catholicism. Evelina's own grandfather, Mooshum, ran away with the girl who would become her grandmother rather than join the priesthood during the time when the largest flock of doves ever seen descended on the area.

In the 1960s, when Evelina is 12, she has her first kiss with a boy named Corwin Peace, and hopes her life will be full of romance the way the lives of her parents and grandparents have been.

Evelina also learns from Mooshum about the grisly 1911 murder of all but one member of the Lochern family, a baby who miraculously survived. Evelina learns that a group of locals, including many prominent members of the community who can trace their origins back to the founding of the town, formed a lynch mob to find the killer. Mooshum explains that the mob targeted a group of innocent Indians, including himself, for the murder. Mooshum recounts that the Sheriff and a veteran military officer tried to stop the lynching, but were held back. Mooshum explains that while the other three Indians were hanged, he was saved at the very last minute by Eugene Wildstrand.

Judge Antone Coutts, who is descended from the first settlers in the area, has a unique place in the town in the law, for he is well aware of family drama and the town's dark history. Everything ultimately gets back to him. Coutts notes that there is nothing that occurs in Pluto that is not a question of blood, for from sexual affairs to the murders, everything is connected by family, close or distant. Indeed, during the course of the novel, Coutts romances and marries Evelina's aunt, Geraldine.

Coutts explains much of this family drama throughout the novel, noting that the older banker John Wildstrand and much younger Native American Maggie Peace had an affair, giving birth to Corwin Peace. Maggie's brother, Billy, cooked up a robbery and kidnapping scheme with John to steal money from the bank to provide for Maggie, but the kidnapping plot ultimately came undone. As a result, Coutts reveals, John killed himself and Billy sought to reform his life by going into the ministry. Coutts explains that Billy ultimately married a girl named Marne Wolde, on whose family land the lynching of



Mooshum's friends transpired many years before. Marne's parents, Marne explains, died a few years after she was married, while her crazy uncle was committed to a state mental institution. In the present, Marne herself explains that Billy ultimately became fanatical and abusive, leading Marne to kill Billy to get away with her children.

Marne befriends Evelina while working as a waitress with her at a diner. Evelina soon after heads off to college, where she does field work at the state mental institution. There, she tends unknowingly to Marne's uncle, Warren, who always finishes his conversations with threats to "kill them all." While at the institution, Corwin comes to visit Evelina, bringing along his violin to play music. While at the institution, Evelina has a brief lesbian romance with a patient named Nonette, then returns home and decides to marry Corwin. Meanwhile, Coutts, who has only recently married Geraldine, recalls his first love with a much older woman he refers to as "C" when he was only 17.

"C" turns out to be Cordelia Lochern, the sole survivor of the 1911 murders. Cordelia, now in her seventies, reflects sadly on the history of the town. She notes that the founding families named the town "Pluto," not knowing Pluto was the Greek god of the underworld. Cordelia, who has spent much time researching the town's history, explains that she believes the murderer of her family to be Warren Wolde. Throughout her life, she received cash from an anonymous source. Upon Warren's death, she receives a massive sum of cash once more. Cordelia also notes how, as a young doctor, she once had to tend to Warren's injuries, and remembers how Warren was startled and scared to see her at first. At the time, Cordelia thought little of this, imagining Warren to be in severe pain. Now, she realizes there must have been a strong family resemblance between her and her family members Warren killed. The institution's staff also notes that Warren died the day Corwin Peace played violin music for Evelina – the same musical instrument playing on the gramophone when Warren killed Cordelia's family.



Section 1: Pages 1 – 63

Summary

Solo – While a gramophone plays, an unidentified man with a gun attempts to kill a baby in a crib. Violin music on the gramophone distracts the man. The gun refuses to fire, so the man reassembles the gun and raises it to fire again.

Evelina

The Plague of Doves – It is 1896. Evelina Harp's great-uncle Severine Milk becomes one of the first Native American Catholic priests in America, overseeing St. Joseph's Church congregation of whites and Native Americans alike. The people do their best to deal with hordes of doves that descended on the area each year, destroying crops and orchards. The people catch, kill, and eat the doves. Evelina's mother's father, Seraph Milk "Mooshum," the younger brother of the priest, serves with him at the church. While trying to chase away the doves, Mooshum encounters a beautiful young woman who has lifted her skirts to avoid birds being caught in them. He immediately falls in love with her. Evelina's family is known for such romantic encounters as the years pass. By World War II, Evelina's father, a science teacher, makes it through World War II based on only a glance from the woman who would become her mother.

The Million Names – Years pass. It is now the 1960s. Evelina is brought up in Catholic school. Her home is among those first to receive indoor plumbing, as Evelina's father and mother both work for the school and the tribal offices. Evelina and her siblings listen to Mooshum recount the story of the time of the doves and his meeting of Evelina's grandmother.

Apparition – It is 1896. The people continue to try to drive the doves off the field. The young woman who has taken Mooshum's attention, Junesse, has fallen behind the others. It is love at first sight for both of them. The two run away together.

The Burning Glare – This chapter returns to Evelina's childhood. Evelina hopes to have her braces come off soon, and hopes that she will be beautiful when they do so that she may fall in love the way all the women of her family have. She punches a boy named Corwin at school in the arm, and tells him to love her or leave her. At Mass on Easter Sunday, Corwin gives Evelina a look of love which makes her happy.

Mustache Maude – This chapter returns to 1896. For their first summer together, Evelina's grandparents live off the land and scrape by, but they are happy together. A large woman on horseback encounters them, and brings them to the ranch she runs with her husband, Ott Black. The woman, "Mustache" Maude Black, becomes a benefactress to Evelina's grandparents. Her grandparents marry when they are both 17, with Maude's blessing. Mooshum is later suspected of the murder of a woman on a farm to the west just because he is an Indian, and even though the woman's husband



mysteriously disappears. Maude and Ott refuse to let a mob drag away Mooshum, saying he is Ott's trueborn son. The mob disperses. Maude and Ott then send Evelina's grandparents on their way back to the reservation for safety.

Story – The chapter returns to Evelina's childhood in the 1960s. Evelina does not know if the story about Maude and Ott is true because the details change with each retelling. As Mooshum ages, he comes to live with Evelina and her family. Her parents, who heavily restrict TV, become lenient as Mooshum is less and less able to get around. In school after Easter, Evelina kisses Corwin Peace for the first time. Walking home, Evelina comes across a massive crack in the sidewalk and realizes she does not feel joy as she expects to, but confusion and sorrow, as though her life is a story she herself will be writing that has only just begun with the kiss.

A Little Nip – Mooshums' younger brother, Shamengwa, comes to visit every so often. The summer after Evelina's first kiss, the volume on the TV gives out. The brothers engage in a number discussions with local priest, Father "Hop Along" Cassidy, about the faith and theology, including the idea that person may sin and not even know about it, such as impure thoughts. Mooshum and Shamengwa, however, don't take anything that Father Cassidy says seriously. Neither does Evelina's brother, Joseph. Evelina's mother is horrified at the behavior of her family, but Father Cassidy waves it away.

While girls benefit from their fathers being visible on the reservation, boys suffer. It is considered uncool among the boys to have a science teacher for a father, so Joseph suffers ridicule and scorn. Joseph, who loves science, spends much of his time studying and exploring. Meanwhile, Mooshum and Shamengwa discuss Metis Catholicism, and whether or not priests should be allowed to marry. They have a love-hate relationship with their faith, and enjoy goading Father Cassidy in debates. Evelina's father believes in God, but only goes to church to make Evelina's mother happy. Mooshum, meanwhile, has taken an interest in local Mrs. Neve Harp, an annoying and distant aunt who is the town of Pluto's historian. Most people frown on this. During a visit with Father Cassidy, Mooshum and Shamengwa get Father Cassidy drunk, after which time he stumbles home following a theological argument. Evelina feels bad for Father Cassidy, because she knows her great-uncles will tell all their buddies about the drunk priest.

Sister Godzilla – Evelina becomes angered when Corwin tells the other boys at school they kissed, so she tries to embarrass him whenever she can, such as in baseball. Eventually, she forgives Corwin based on his love for her. Over the summer, Evelina begins going through puberty. When the school year begins, Evelina learns her sixth grade teacher is to be Sister Mary Anita, young, kind, and a good baseball player. Evelina nicknames Sister Mary Anita "Godzilla" due to her large jaw, and draws a mean sketch of her as a result. Sister Anita tells her to remain after school, during which time she explains that while she may have long ago accepted her prognathic jaw, mean comments still hurt her. Evelina apologizes, truly feeling bad for her. Evelina begins to defend Sister Anita against other kids who make fun of her, including Corwin, whom she punches. Evelina comes to realize she believes she is in love with Sister Anita. When she tries to stop a prank hatched by Corwin involving a Godzilla toy, Sister Anita comes to believe that Evelina is to blame.



Holy Track – Although Sister Anita does not punish Evelina, she does keep Evelina at a distance. This hurts Evelina, who is even more in love with Sister Anita. Mooshum tells Evelina the story of Junesse’s cousin and her son who lived on the edge of their land many years before. The mother, dying of tuberculosis, had Mooshum nail crosses to the soles of the son’s boots so that sickness and evil could not follow him. The boy, as predicted, does not become ill. He is nicknamed “Holy Track” for the footprints he leaves in the snow.

The Clothesline – As Evelina’s mother does laundry, she insists her children do not need to hear Mooshum’s stories. Mooshum ignores her.

The Basket Makers – Holy Track, Mooshum explains, went on to learn how to make baskets. Mooshum and Cuthbert “Opin” Peace became friends with Holy Track and his guardian, Uncle Asiginak. Asiginak told Mooshum and Opin that Holy Track was destined for the priesthood, and were not worthy to walk in Holy Track’s tracks.

The Lochren Farm – Mooshum continues to recall stories of Holy Track for Evelina. Mooshum and Opin followed Holy Track and Asiginak to a farm just outside the town of Pluto. Mooshum recalls that he felt something was very wrong with the place upon arriving. Asiginak, too, felt as if something was wrong, saying the devil was in the place. It was then they all heard a crying baby. The door to the house is marked with blood. The baby is carried out safely, while the baby’s entire family is discovered to have been murdered.

Analysis

“The Plague of Doves” is a historical, spiritual novel by Louise Erdrich that recounts the lives, misfortunes, and choices of the citizens of Pluto, North Dakota, all revolving around an old murder. The events of the novel are first explored by the half-White, half-Native American Evelina Harp, who recounts her own family’s romantic and colorful history. The theme of religion and spirituality, as well as a theme of history, become essential here to the Harps and their lives. The family has deep roots in the area as a matter of being Indian and being descended from the early white settlers, as well as having deep roots in religion, specifically Catholicism.

The Harps have a love-hate relationship with Catholicism. While Evangeline’s mother is devoutly Catholic, her father only attends church to make her mother happy. Mooshum, on the other hand, tends to be more combative regarding Catholicism while his brother, Shamengwa, is deeply religious. Part of this comes from the idea that Catholicism is not native to the Indians, while some of the Indians see greater truth in Catholicism. Nevertheless, the Catholicism that the Harps observe is fused with a Native American spirituality in which dreams, visions, and symbolism are critically important – but even more so than in Catholicism.

The reader should herein note the flocks of doves that descend on and around Pluto as being seen by residents symbolically in various ways, but physically as a nuisance. For



Mooshum, the birds represent flight and freedom, evidenced by his decision to run off with Junesse rather than become a priest. But for the town as a whole, birds come to symbolize bad luck and misfortune. Their scouring of the landscape and crops – destroying life – serves as a symbolic precursor of the lives the residents themselves will be taking soon, both in the murders and the subsequent lynchings.

Great symbolism can also be seen in the crack that Evelina encounters on the sidewalk while returning home from school after her first kiss. The reader will recall that Evelina is more confused than overjoyed by her first kiss: the solid sidewalk represents her hopes of, and expectations for a smooth, gentle romance, while the crack serves as the flaws, the uncertainty, and the confusion that life can bring. The reader should also pay close attention to the idea that the sidewalk becomes symbolic for the town of Pluto, with the crack serving as representative of the murders and lynchings that mar the town's existence.

The murders and the lynchings themselves bring into play the theme of fate and free will. Prior to the doves, Mooshum believed he was fated to become a priest; after their arrival, he meets Junesse, and this opens up an entirely new horizon of possibilities to him. While Evelina may have considered the romantic lives of her family members to be so perfect they might have been fated, Evelina's own life, to her, seems horribly fraught with choices and possibilities. Again, Evelina cannot understand why her first kiss is not fated to be perfect. As the reader will later learn, this is in part because Evelina is bisexual.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the Harps seem to have love and hate relationships with Catholicism? What seems to be the source of love and antagonism toward the faith?

Discussion Question 2

How is the 1896 arrival of the doves viewed by the residents of Pluto? How is it seen by Mooshum? Are the doves ultimately to be seen as a good omen or a bad omen? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Evelina's first kiss not go according to plan? How does the confusion generated by the kiss reflect life as a whole?

Vocabulary

diminishment, vestments, pungent, vehement, impermanence, impetuous, benefactress, profane, ecclesiastic, concupiscence, endemic



Section 2: Pages 64 – 130

Summary

A Little Medicine – Mooshum stops telling his story when Evelina's mother comes back in from doing the laundry, but resumes when she leaves. He explains that Asiginak and Holy Track were targeted for the killings by a mob of men, including relatives of Sister Mary Anita, the Buckendorfs, but got away just in time.

Confessional – Mooshum explains he helped Holy Track to escape. Holy Track later went to see his priest, Father Severine, for Confession, explaining the situation with the baby and explaining he had nothing to do with the murder of the baby's family.

The Sisters – Evelina's mother and Aunt Geraldine enter the room. Mooshum falls silent until they leave.

The Party – Mooshum reveals that ultimately, the mob of men caught Asiginak and also rounded up Cuthbert. He also reveals that Holy Track voluntarily gave himself up.

The Baby – Mooshum explains that, the night after the murder, Tobek, the 17-year-old younger brother of a woman named Electa Hoag had run away with all his possessions. Mooshum reveals the surviving baby was left with Electa, for she was a neighbor to the murdered family. Mooshum also reveals that Electa did not tell the sheriff of her brother's disappearance. Mooshum also explains that his old friend Johann Vogeli saw his father, Frederic, smoking a cigarette in the middle of the day.

Vogeli – Mooshum explains that Vogeli not only saw his father smoking, but speaking to the Buckendorfs, also smoking.

Death Song – Mooshum explains that Colonel Benton Lungsford and Sheriff Quintus Fells caught up with the mob that sought to hang Asiginak and Cuthbert. Among those in the mob were Vogeli's father, Frederic, Emil Buckendorf, Eugene Wildstrand, William Hotchkiss, and others. Lungsford and Quintus attempted to talk down the mob, but the mob was determined to hang who they believed had murdered. They shot the Sheriff's horse and continued on.

The Clatter of Wings – Mooshum explains that the mob went on to hang Asiginak, Cuthbert, and Holy Track from an oak tree.

Bitter Tea – Mooshum finishes his story as a storm comes on. He, Evelina, and Joseph help Evelina's mother and Aunt Geraldine prepare dinner. The next day, Uncle Whitey and Shamengwa come to visit. Uncle Whitey teaches Evelina how to fight to defend herself while Mooshum and Shamengwa watch. Evelina asks what ever became of the mob. Shamengwa is stunned that Mooshum has told Evelina the story of the hangings. Mooshum explains the men in the mob became powerful, wealthy people in the county,



while the Sheriff was crippled from the fall when his horse was killed, and Colonel Lungsford moved east out of disgust.

Aunt Neve suddenly arrives for a visit, to interview the old Indians of the family. Mooshum is thrilled to have her around. Neve is curious about how the boundaries of the town of Pluto have come to be within the Indian reservation's boundaries. Evelina's mother says this is because the land was stolen from those hung at the lynching. Although a Harp later married a Wildstrand, Evelina reminds her mother that no Harps were present at the lynching. Evelina's mother relaxes a little, saying that at least Sister Mary Anita has come to help the children of the reservation. She also explains that Junese's father was Eugene Wildstrand. With so much of the family history now out in the open, Mama tells Evelina her Aunt Geraldine is having an affair with Judge Coutts.

Lines – After learning so much about the past, Evelina can no longer look at anyone in the same way, including her friends because of their ancestry and the murders. The story also disturbs Evelina's respect for her uncle, though she cannot exactly say why.

The Way Things Are – Judge Coutts decides he wishes to marry Geraldine Milk the first time he sees her in the tribal offices where she works as a tribal enrollment specialist. After the death of her boyfriend some years before, Geraldine became distant from everyone –something which took Coutts a long time to get her to move past. While out fishing with Coutts, Geraldine explains that the brothers of Cuthbert Peace, Henri and Lafayette, saved her grandfather Mooshum's life back in 1911. They also talk about how the reservation is bordered by the towns of Hoopdance, Argus, and Pluto, and how the reservation is slowly transitioning to light industry for government tax incentives. Geraldine catches a turtle which reminds her of the time she and her dead boyfriend caught a turtle. She throws the turtle back sadly. It worries Coutts that he may lose Geraldine, but knows it is in keeping with the tradition of family men to always lose women.

Town Fever – This chapter occurs in the past. Joseph J. Coutts, grandfather of Judge Coutts, decides to join a town-site expedition to the plains at the insistence of Reginald Bull. The expedition is to help Odin Merimack and Colonel Levinn P. Poolcaugh, two land speculators, survey and establish claims. The men who work for them will be paid in land shares. Among the men is Emil Buckendorf. The expedition will be guided by Henri and Lafayette Peace.

The Expedition – This chapter occurs in the past. Joseph Coutts signs onto the expedition officially, meeting Henri and Lafayette in the process.

The Great Drive – This chapter occurs in the past. The only things Joseph brings with him are a locket from his girl, Dorea, and a book of the writings of Marcus Aurelius. While the men start out in good spirits, heavy snow sets in. It becomes bitterly cold. The men huddle together to keep warm at night. Joseph does his best to keep strong, reflecting on the words of Aurelius who encouraged men to live each moment as if it was one's last. He also thinks of the locket belonging to Dorea that he has brought along.



Batner's Powders - This chapter occurs in the past. After a month of travel, Joseph and the land party reach the area they have been seeking to claim. Another horrible blizzard sets in. The men develop bowel trouble and take Batner's Powder to ease the burden. The men also lose weight, and food runs low. While out hunting, the men manage to take two buffalo calves and a buffalo cow, which brings up their spirits and resupplies their food stock.

The Emissary – This chapter occurs in the past. Joseph learns that Henri and Lafayette are the most religiously devout among them. Catholics, they thank God for every bit of good they experience, including successful hunting. In the spring, Bull is sent back for supplies, but the others worry whether he will be able to successfully handle the muddy plains. Flooding occurs, which swamps the cabin the men have built. Joseph rushes inside to save his book on Aurelius, and discovers an otter swimming around. Joseph shoots the otter without thinking, then begins to cry. He believes the otter had been an emissary of some sort. As food runs low once more, the little terrier dog belonging to Henri and Lafayette begins to hunt, bringing back good food for the men.

The Millions – This chapter occurs in the past. Bull returns a few weeks later, thin, fully-bearded, and having failed to get back to town. Bull dies mere moments after returning to camp, looking up at millions of stars.

Lafayette Peace – This chapter occurs in the past. Spring continues to come on. B. J. Bolt, who had started out to meet Joseph's team with his own group of men, has arrived alone as his team has abandoned him. With no more supplies, Joseph and the others know their situation is desperate. Joseph wishes he had the faith of Henri and Lafayette, but Henri tells Joseph that the saints always smile on Lafayette. Lafayette then heads out on his own, prompting Henri to tell Joseph they will have meat the following day. When the expedition returns to the town of Saint Anthony, he discovers Dorea has married another man in his absence.

The Saint – This chapter occurs in the past. It takes Joseph a long time to recover from the expedition, both physically and emotionally. He goes to see the young housekeeper of Bull to pay his respects, for he knew they were to be married. The housekeeper is sad, but says she is ready to move on. Out of respect for Bull, Joseph does not follow through on the urge to ask the girl to marry him instead. Joseph prays to God, considers the words of Aurelius urging men on to achieve new things in life, and decides to become a lawyer.

The Wolf – This chapter returns to the present. Judge Coutts has carried on in the family tradition of practicing law. Coutts tries to keep parts of his past life a secret now that he lives in Pluto, such as his broken heart. Coutts also explains that one of his first cases was a crime that had resulted in the birth of Corwin peace. He notes that nothing that happens in Pluto is not connected by blood. This is especially true of sexual relations. To this day, Neve Harp, the ex-wife of John Wildstrand, still glares at Coutts for having defended Wildstrand back in the day.



Come In – This chapter occurs in the past. John Wildstrand, manager of National Bank of Pluto, the town bank, is confronted by Billy Peace, little brother of John's girlfriend, Maggie. Billy forces John into a car at gunpoint. Billy demands \$10,000 for his sister and the baby. John insists this will not be enough for the future. John then plots to secure \$50,000 as a loan under a fake business instead. This is too much for Billy, however. Billy wishes to know why John will not run off with Maggie. John explains if it wasn't for his money and his position in town, Maggie would not look twice at him because he is older, balding, and not attractive. John decides instead to stage a staged hostage situation, to allow Billy to get away with the money for Maggie.

The Gingerbread Boy – This chapter occurs in the past. Billy arrives the next evening to conduct the staged kidnapping, bringing Neve away and leaving John to take the money out of his savings account rather than the bank itself.

Helpless – This chapter occurs in the past. Neve is traumatized by the kidnapping, even though she returns home safely. She becomes ill, loses weight, and questions whether or not John would have died for her. She becomes very needy of John, which horrifies John because he did not anticipate the kidnapping would affect Neve so deeply.

Murdo Harp - This chapter occurs in the past. John goes to visit his father-in-law in the Pluto Nursing Home, which he has helped to endow. Murdo, suffering from memory loss, asks how his daughter is doing. John explains Neve has a cold, but that he will take care of her. He suddenly calls John a bastard.

The Gesture - This chapter occurs in the past. Neve tells John she believes she knows who the kidnapper was. John knows the game is up, and leaves home.

The Lions – John moves in with Maggie just before their baby is born. Maggie learns of the kidnapping, and is furious. She keeps her distance from John and Billy for a while.

Analysis

The murders and the lynchings bring into play the theme of death. Death hangs over the town of Pluto much the way that the flocks of doves once did. The murders and the lynchings are a tragic and terrible part of Pluto's history which can never be undone or hidden away. While these are not things regularly spoken of in town, they are consciously known about by nearly all of the residents. The fact that death is such a dark, integral part of Pluto's life disturbs Evelina deeply when she finds out about the murders and the lynchings. Like the cracked sidewalk of the previous section, Evelina's perception of the town and its residents will never be the same again. It has been forever scarred by the knowledge, just as the town has been forever scarred and divided by the murders and lynching.

Death serves as a true catalyst for racial relations and racism. The mob that forms to track down the killer of the Locherns ends up targeting Mooshum and his group of Indian friends as convenient scapegoats. While the white and Indian residents of Pluto and the surrounding countryside seem largely at peace with one another and have even



intermarried, ancient hatreds and deep-seated, masked racism ultimately break through as a result of drunkenness and anger over the murders.

The white Sheriff and a white veteran military officer attempt to stop the mob from carrying out the lynching, but are themselves held back at gunpoint. The Sheriff's horse is even shot to deter them from trying to intervene, and the Sheriff is injured in the process. The mob, which includes many prominent citizens from founding families, hangs and kills Holy Track, Asiginak, and Opin – but conscience seems to catch up with at least one of the members of the mob, who saves Mooshum at the last minute. This savior will later be revealed as Eugene Wildstrand. The Sheriff and the Colonel, disgusted with the town, left.

Family history matters a great deal both to the town of Pluto, and to the plot of the novel. As Judge Coutts – himself a descendant of the first white settlers to the area – notes, nothing occurs in the town of Pluto without blood, meaning every family is somehow intertwined with the others. A descendant of Eugene Wildstrand, John Wildstrand, has an affair with the much younger Maggie that results in pregnancy and a failed kidnapping plot with her brother, Billy.

The Peaces themselves are descended from the Indian guides who brought the first whites to the area more than a century before. Interestingly enough, the Peace brothers are more devout than the white men with whom they travel. To them, religion is not a question of race, but of belief – something that will be lost on some of the future residents of the town of Pluto. Henri and Lafayette invest themselves heavily in trusting God – and their faith sees the expedition through.

Coutts does not believe that men or the town of Pluto is fated, but rather the product of choices, decisions, and free will. Coutts, who has a deep respect for God and the writings of Marcus Aurelius, knows that choices matter. It was not fate that brought their ancestors, both white and Indian, to found a town where they did. It was not fate that brought their descendants to murder by lynching, but choice. John was not fated to cheat on his wife, but chose to do so. Only in the area of love does Coutts consider fate may somehow affect him, for the men of his family have never been blessed in the area of love. However, this tenuous suspicion of fate is undone later in the novel when Coutts ends up married to Geraldine instead of having his heart broken by her.

Discussion Question 1

Judge Coutts explains that nothing goes on in the town not connected by blood. What does he mean by this? Provide three examples from the text that support Coutts's observation.

Discussion Question 2

Why does the mob target Mooshum and his small group of friends? Why do the Sheriff and the Colonel try to stop the mob? What happens as a result?



Discussion Question 3

How does Judge Coutts feel about the concepts of fate and free will? Why? What is the one area of his life that challenges his belief? Why is this so?

Vocabulary

aperture, melodious, repercussions, vocation, deprivation, scrupulous, metaphorically



Section 3: Pages 131 – 189

Summary

The Garage – This chapter occurs in the past. Things get worse between John and Maggie. Maggie is still furious with the kidnapping plot. John ends up sleeping in the garage as a result. Maggie names their baby boy Corwin, after one of Billy's army buddies. John goes back to Pluto to collect possessions Neve has not thrown away.

The Entryway – This chapter occurs in the past. Neve files a claim against John for everything she had previously urged him to come and clear out of their house. He learns the money is needed since the bank he and Neve are partners in will not be bought out as had been hoped. John and Neve then have sex in the house entryway, after which he confesses everything about the plot. Neve explains she only ever wanted to be wanted. She then calls the police.

A Shiver of Possibility – This chapter occurs in the past. John is tried, arrested, and imprisoned for what he has done. He claims all responsibility, leaving Billy out of it. He explains to friends years later that his decision to try the plot at all was the idea of a shiver of possibility for what might happen in the future.

Marn Wolde

Satan: Hijacker of a Planet – This chapter occurs in the past. Marn Wolde meets Billy the summer she is 16. She immediately finds him attractive. All summer, she has found herself fascinated by men, and wants to know what a man really is. Billy arrives at her farm to invite Marn and her family to a revival, but Marn's parents have no desire for new religion. Marn goes alone, and is deeply moved by Billy's preaching. Billy explains that the stars are the eyes of God, and there is a star for each person in the world. Billy goes on to say the Devil is among the people of the world in things like greed. Marn stays after the revival meeting to praying and laying hands over Preacher Ed's sick mother. When Marn does this, she suddenly has a vision about Ed's mother's life, growing up in Montana with the sunlight of her life now fading away.

The Daniels – This chapter occurs in the past. Marn marries Billy, gives him two children, Judah and Lilith, and travels around with him. Marn soon tires of the constant movement, and wants to go home and find stability. She hopes it will also bring her parents and Billy closer together. Billy finally consents to doing this. When they return home, Marn's parents are thrilled. Marn and Billy learn that Marn's brothers either have no interest in farming or have gotten into trouble, and Marn's uncle has gone crazy. Billy spends his time between preaching and learning to farm. Billy becomes the son Marn's father never had. The farm also becomes the site of a new church Billy begins. Billy puts on weight and is struck by lightning while leading a prayer group for rain late in the summer. Billy, amazingly, survives.



The Kindred – This chapter occurs in the past. Marn's uncle suddenly tells Marn one day that he sees it on her that she is going to kill. Marn and Billy commit her uncle to the state institution. Her parents die soon after. Over time, Billy becomes obsessive, and then fanatical in his beliefs. People begin living there, turning the place into a religious compound. People live and sleep wherever they can – including in the chicken coop and in barrels. Billy begins preaching over the radio, and funds pour in. Billy requires strict chores and tasks of those who stay on, and work the land. Punishments are harsh, such as being forced to kneel until collapsing. Marn worries for the safety of her children. Billy tells her that if she ever leaves, she knows what he will do with the children. Marn grows to hate Billy, especially for his cruelty to their children. While having sex with him one night, Marn manages to kill him with a poison syringe, then strangles him with a necktie just to make sure he is dead. With money in hand, she and her children flee the compound.

Evelina

The 4-Bs – This chapter occurs in the present. Evelina, a senior in high school now, works as a waitress at the 4-Bs diner. She sees Marn, whom she is acquainted with, arrive with her two children. Marn seems out of it to Evelina. As Evelina says she will learn shortly, it is probably because Marn had just murdered her husband. The children are happy for their meal, and even happier about dessert which they have never truly had before. A large blonde woman from the compound, Bliss, suddenly arrives in the 4-B to confront Marn, declaring Marn a murderer. Bliss attacks Marn, but Marn stabs Bliss and chases her away. Earl, the manager, and Whitey, the owner, are stunned by what has happened and begin to clean up the mess. As cleaning gets underway, Evelina thinks about how the 4-B had once been the National Bank of Pluto. Mooshum then arrives and settles into a booth to chat with Earl. Marn is hired on to work at the diner. Marn then tells Evelina she needs to see the judge.

Analysis

The reader should bear in mind the themes of history, and fate and free will in addition to Judge Coutt's observation that everything that transpires in and around Pluto is connected by blood. The history between Maggie and John, which results in the creation of Corwin Peace, comes unwound as John confesses everything to his wife. John is ultimately arrested and imprisoned for his scheming and swindling the bank of money. John refuses to implicate Billy in things, giving Billy a chance to keep clear and reform his life. This Billy does by going into the ministry.

Once again, religion and spirituality become an important theme as Billy becomes passionately Christian. Before Billy becomes fanatical, he is at first a genuine preacher of the Word of God. He is well-loved and well-respected among the people he ministers and preaches to. Billy, in the sermon which earns him the love of Marn, explains that stars are the eyes of God, and there is a star for each person. In other words, each individual life matters to God and to events in the world. No one is worthless, and everyone has an impact. This is certainly the case in Pluto, and underscores Coutts's



acceptance of free will as being the determining factor in human life. That God pays attention to each person means that each person is responsible for his or her own life and therefore, life choices. If everything was fated, God would not be paying attention.

The reader should also carefully note that Billy and Marn return to Marn's family land to live their lives. It is during this time that Billy ends up becoming fanatical to the point that he and his followers fashion a compound on the farm, and rarely allow anyone to leave. What matters in the return of Marn and Billy is that they commit Marn's uncle to the state institution as he has gone crazy. Before he is committed, he tells Marn that she will kill someone. Marn's uncle is considered crazy, but the visions that he has Marn takes seriously since she herself has been known to have spiritual visions. Ultimately, as predicted, Marn comes to kill Billy in order to escape the compound with her children to bring them to safety. Here, the theme of death once again becomes central to the plot, as Marn makes a choice of free will to escape the life she seems destined to live and die under Billy.

Coutt's contention that everything in Pluto is connected by blood again comes to be utterly relevant, as the lives of Marn and Evelina cross through their coming to work at the 4-B Diner – formerly the National Bank of Pluto once owned and operated by John Wildstrand and Neve Harp. The nephew of Marn, Corwin Peace, is romantically interested in Evelina – and has his own part to play in the events surrounding Pluto. (This will be revealed in coming chapters.) The reader should note that Mooshum randomly shows up at the diner to talk with Earl just after the scuffle between Marn and Bess. Mooshum, as will later be revealed, was saved by an ancestor of Corwin's, Eugene Wildstrand. That Mooshum should arrive just after Marn has managed to save herself from Corwin's blood uncle, who has ties to the founding of the town through his ancestry, is emblematic of just how small and closely linked the town and its history are.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Billy originally go into preaching? What brings him from passionate and genuine belief to deranged fanaticism? What happens as a result?

Discussion Question 2

Do the events surrounding the killing of Billy reinforce or undermine Coutt's belief in both free will and the idea that everything that occurs in Pluto is connected through blood? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Although it is clear that Marn's uncle is crazy, his prediction that she will kill someone strikes her deeply. Why? What turns out to be the truth behind the uncle's prediction?

Vocabulary

beckoned, emanate, studious, intermittently, fathomless, cognitions, glutted, fallow, incongruent, fidelity, stupefied



Section 4: Pages 190 – 254

Summary

Judge Antone Bazil Coutts

Shamengwa – Coutts explains that, as judge, he knows a lot about the people whom he serves. He knows that Shamengwa has aged gracefully, and is still very lively. Shamengwa especially loves to play the violin, and owns a very rare and very expensive violin which is later stolen. Coutts notes that Corwin has dropped out of school and become a troublemaker, getting into the selling of drugs. Coutts suspects Corwin of the violin theft. While sitting down to talk with Shamengwa, Coutts is told a story about the two fiddles owned by Shamengwa in his life.

The First Fiddle – This chapter occurs in the past. When Shamengwa is four, his younger brother dies of diphtheria. After this, his parents become more religious. Shamengwa's mother comes to love her surviving children all the more deeply as well. Shamengwa's father loved to play the violin. After the visit of the doves, Shamengwa and his family learn that Seraph Milk has run away. This makes Shamengwa feel restless and want to seek freedom, but he comes to learn that freedom isn't only to be found in running, but in the mind, the heart, and the hands. Shamengwa finds freedom in learning how to play the fiddle. When Shamengwa's father learns Shamengwa can play, he leaves the family. Shamengwa believes this is because his playing awakened something in his father. Shamengwa has a dream in which he is told to await someone at the Southern rock of the lake. Shamengwa does as his dream instructs. There, an empty canoe with a violin inside drifts to Shamengwa.

Silent Passage – This chapter returns to the present. Corwin brings the fiddle he has stolen to a mall in Fargo. He loves how handsome he is, and loves the way people look at him. He often feels like a rockstar, and believes he should be featured in Rolling Stone Magazine. No one at the mall will buy the violin. At the food court, Corwin mimics playing the violin.

The Fire – Corwin is picked up by the police and brought to Judge Coutts. Hoping to turn the drug-using, drug-selling Corwin around, Coutts orders Corwin to take music lessons six days a week or go to jail. Shamengwa is the one who teaches Corwin. Even after the deal ends, Corwin continues to take music lessons from Shamengwa, improving over time. When Corwin improves to the point that his skill cannot be told apart from Shamengwa's, Shamengwa passes away. Father Cassidy delivers the eulogy at Shamengwa's funeral, mistakenly mixing up the names of the brothers. The violin that Corwin attempted to pawn is gifted to Corwin, which he then plays at the funeral, amazing everyone.

Letter – This chapter occurs in the past. It is August 20, 1888. Henri Baptiste Parentheau Peace speaks of the violin handed down from the region's first French



explorers through generations until both Henri and his brother, Lafayette, stand to inherit it. Henri wants the violin and comes up with a plan to ensure he gains possession of it. Henri offsets the balance of his brother's canoe by adding tar pitch to only one side before they are to race to the southern end of the lake to where their uncles wait to award the winner of the race with the violin. As it turns out, Lafayette has pierced the bottom of Henri's canoe, causing it slowly sink. Rain sets in. Henri manages to make it to shore and win the race. Lafayette, who has taken a shortcut, is never seen again. Henri is heartbroken, and vows to send out a canoe with the violin on the day he can no longer play. Twenty years later, the violin calls out to Shamengwa.

Evelina

The Reptile Garden – It is now Autumn, 1972. Evelina's parents drive her to college in Grand Forks. She brings along new clothes, a copy of Marcus Aurelius's book "Meditations" from Judge Coutts, photographs, a quilt knitted by Evelina's mother, and more. Although Grand Forks is not far at all from Pluto, Evelina still dreads leaving home. She worries Mooshum will die while she is gone. She does her best to fit in among the white and Indian girls at school, and becomes an avid reader of Anais Nin, a Cuban-American writer. Evelina especially comes to enjoy Nin's diaries. Evelina begins carrying a notebook with her and jotting down all her thoughts and lines of poetry. Evelina sees herself as distinct and different from her college peers, and knows she could never be one of them. When she is given the opportunity to work as a psychiatric aide at the state mental hospital, she leaps at the chance to live off-campus.

Warren – At the hospital, Evelina meets Warren, a very old man who rarely ever sleeps. Warren is a veteran from Pluto, and tells everyone he meets that he will "slaughter them all." Warren is a patient in the open ward where Evelina is assigned. The open ward consists of patients who may voluntarily sign themselves in and out as they wish.

Nonette – A young woman named Nonette is admitted to the ward. Nonette is very pretty but dresses like a man with the makeup of a woman. Nonette reveals that she was sexually abused at the age of nine by a distant relative. Nonette explains she then sought out sexual encounters with older men, which has continued ever since. A friendship develops between Evelina and Nonette. The next day, Warren is returned to the mental hospital after sneaking out and crawling into a farm field 20 miles away. He says he did what he was told to do, but won't say anything else.

The Kiss – Evelina and Nonette grow closer together, and kiss. Evelina is both excited and frightened by the kiss, comparing herself to Anais's sexually erotic stories. Evelina finds herself unable to stop thinking about Nonette. They encounter one another again a few days later and kiss again. Evelina believes that within a few weeks, Nonette will be well enough to leave the hospital, and then she will leave with her. Mrs. L., the administrator, cautions Evelina that Nonette is on lithium for depression when Evelina asks for a patient visit. Evelina brings Nonette to her room, and two have sex. They also make cookies in order to use as a cover for what they have really done. Evelina learns some time later that Nonette has been cleared to return home. Evelina knows she cannot leave with Nonette now, and becomes stricken. She herself is committed to the



institution. Evelina's parents visit every weekend. Evelina has much time to think, including about the past and the people who live in Pluto. She realizes that history works itself out in the living, and how the hangings so many years ago tangle so many family histories together in ways they had never been before.

The Concert – Corwin comes to visit Evelina, playing music on his violin for her. The music soothes and comforts her. He then brings her home back to Pluto. She tells him she is a lesbian, but Corwin tells her she doesn't have to rush out and do anything about it.

Walking on Air – Evelina goes to visit Sister Mary Anita at Saint Joseph's Convent. She tells Sister Anita that she has been thinking about becoming a nun. Sister Anita gently tells Evelina that she can't see Evelina belonging to a convent. She then asks Evelina if Evelina has had some sort of experience that has made her think about joining. Evelina then explains she was in a mental hospital. She also confesses to no longer believing in God. Sister Anita explains that faith can be difficult, and that she herself also has doubts sometimes. Evelina asks if Sister Anita's decision to join the convent was to atone for her ancestors and the hanging. Sister Anita explains that, in some ways, that is true. At home, Mooshum explains that the mob had intended to hang him, but that he was cut down at the last second - after he had passed out - by Eugene Wildstrand. She and Mooshum then go to the hanging tree, on Marn's land. There, he has Evelina throw Holy Track's boots into the tree. It takes Evelina three attempts, but she succeeds. Mooshum says the doves are still in the sky.

Analysis

History is an immensely important theme in this section of the novel. Coutts reveals that his position in the law in the town of Pluto means that he knows much about the local families and local history. This includes firsthand knowledge of Corwin's dropping out of school and getting into using and selling drugs, as well as knowledge of how much Shamengwa loves to play a violin handed down to him through the generations by the empty canoe and the settler-guiding Peace brothers who themselves received the violin through the generations from the first white explorers to the area. Corwin steals the violin to pawn, but is unable to sell the violin. Rather than send Corwin to jail, Coutts takes it upon himself – believing that no one is fated or has their life predetermined (if so, he would have been convinced that Corwin would have only ever amounted to failure and crime) – to have Corwin attempt reform by learning to play the instrument he stole from the person he stole it from.

Even outside of Pluto, the interconnectedness of Pluto's past stays with those who have left the town's orbit. This can be seen through Evelina's training at the state mental hospital, where she meets the very old, very mentally disturbed Warren. Warren is a veteran and resident of Pluto who ends his conversations with assertions that he will "kill them all." Here, death remains an important theme through the town's history, as no matter where Evelina goes, traces of Pluto remain. It is in her very blood –and very affirming of the fact that everything that happens in Pluto is connected by blood.



It is while Evelina is staying and working at the mental institute that she meets, befriends, and falls in love with Nonette. The romance between Evelina and Nonette is thrilling and very different for Evelina, whose bisexuality has long confused her as she previously felt pulled between her teacher and Corwin. Evelina is devastated when her relationship with Nonette does not last. Corwin's visit to Evelina at the institute when she herself is a patient there should be noted by the reader due to Corwin's playing of the violin. This is not merely incidental, but will be crucial to the climax of the novel's plot.

The history of the town of Pluto, along with its family connectedness, religion, and fate and free will collide in Evelina's conversation with Sister Mary Anita. Sister Anita explains that at least part of her decision to become a nun has been to atone for her family's past, primarily, their role in the 1911 lynchings. She is not fated to succumb to the drama and tangled web that is Pluto. Rather, out of her own freedom and free choice, she has chosen to give her life to God, effectively separating herself from the town, though not cutting herself free of it (she will forever be bound to the town by blood). The interconnectedness of the community of Pluto is also again seen through the journey Mooshum and Evelina make to "the tree" where the lynching occurred – on Marn's family land.

Given the difficult nature of the town's founding, the murder, and the lynchings, the conclusion that the town is cursed – or fated toward death – is debatable. This can be seen through Mooshum's insistence that he still sees the doves in the sky, meaning that death will come again upon the town. But whether the doves are symbolic of fate or are present as the result of the free choices that men make is left uncertain here. Still, immediate evidence is offered which warrants free will surely plays a part in things, as Eugene Wildstrand did not have to cut down and save Mooshum's life.

Paying his respects to Holy Track and the other two dead, Mooshum has Evelina throw Holy Track's old shoes into the tree branches. Note that it takes her three attempts to do so – one for each of the dead – and that three may be seen to represent the Holy Trinity of the Catholic Church – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – and here may be seen to represent the fact that Holy Track and the others are now in the presence of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit in Heaven.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Evelina and Mooshum go to visit the tree where the lynching occurred? What is the experience like for them both, especially Mooshum given the fact that he nearly died there?

Discussion Question 2

Judge Coutts decides to give Corwin a chance at reform rather than committing him to prison. Why? What does this have to say, especially, about Coutt's beliefs about fate and free will as well?



Discussion Question 3

How is the theme of fate and free will discussed in this section of the novel, especially with respect to the vision of doves that Mooshum sees at the lynching tree? What do you believe explains the doves? Why?

Vocabulary

fanatical, exquisite, configurations, mimicry, impeccable, reprobate, recapitulation, harmonious, belligerent, treacherous, paradigm



Section 5: Pages 255 – 311

Summary

All Soul's Day – It is Halloween. Evelina, who has returned to school, comes home to visit Mooshum. Evelina and Mooshum hand out candy to trick-or-treaters while Evelina's parents are out at a church event. Mooshum begins scaring the kids, but one of the kids from the last group throws a rock at Mooshum, knocking him out and causing him to bleed. Evelina's parents are just returning as this happens, so they bring Mooshum to the hospital. At the hospital, Mooshum announces he is going to die. Father Cassidy then arrives to see how Mooshum is doing. Mooshum says he wants to die in peace or he'll extend his life and continue to annoy the priest.

Nevertheless, Father Cassidy remains with Mooshum after Evelina and her parents leave. A year later, Father Cassidy quits the priesthood, goes into the cattle business, becomes famous for it, and makes millions. Evelina and Corwin go out. They park, get into the backseat of his car, and strip naked. They kiss and touch each other, but do not have sex. Corwin insists they get married, hoping that Evelina's lesbianism is not permanent. On the way home, they encounter Mooshum walking along alone, and pick him up. He asks to be taken to Neve's, so Corwin and Evelina drive him there. He spends the night. The next morning, back at home, he announces he now has something to confess. Evelina's father is later horrified by the destruction of his stamp collection during a car accident.

Road in the Sky – Aunt Geraldine finally decides to marry Judge Coutts. Coutts nearly cries because he is so happy and relieved at not having to be alone anymore. The entire town and surrounding community is thrilled by the match.

Judge Antone Bazil Coutts

The Veil – The Judge and Geraldine decide to save their money to go on a really nice honeymoon in the future. They settle down happily into married life. The Judge thinks about how before Geraldine, he never thought he could love anyone except C.

Demolition – This chapter occurs in the past. The Judge explains that at 17 he loved an older woman far larger than himself he refers to as "C". It was a secret love affair carried on over the summer while the Judge worked a job digging graves. As the years pass, the Judge overtakes C in height and build. At the same time, the Judge's mother's health declines, and she jokes that the Judge will soon be digging a grave for her. The Judge does not want to hear this. His mother also insists he find a wife, but he is too worried about his mother and too happy with his affair for anything else. In the end, C chooses another younger, named Ted Bursap, over the Judge. The Judge, heartbroken, buries himself in studying the law as an escape, and finds he loves it. It is then that he learns of Marcus Aurelius through his grandfather's papers, and becomes a fan of Aurelius himself.



Soon after, the now-married C carries on her affair with the Judge. Meanwhile, the Judge's mother grows weaker and must go to live at the Pluto Nursing Home. The Judge sells his house. The buyer is, ironically, Ted. C doesn't want any of this to change, so she confronts Ted, finally determined to run away with the Judge to the city. Ted, working on the house, ignores her and continues working. He hacks into a bee hive in the walls, causing a swarm to emerge and sting him so many times he loses consciousness. Things with C end soon after. The Judge enters the law profession, works in Washington, D.C., then returns where he later marries Geraldine. The Judge only sees C once more, when she has aged further. She is now an old woman, which she explains she had to do so that the Judge would leave and get on with his own life. The Judge later learns that C had acquired a reputation as a doctor who refused to treat Indians.

Doctor Cordelia Lochren

Disaster Stamps of Pluto – Doctor Cordelia Lochren, now in her seventies, looks out at the town and reflects on how there are now more dead than living residents in Pluto. The town, she explains, is dying. A fertilizer plant appears to make it seem as if the town might flourish into the 2000s, but the plant does not last. Cordelia has recently been elected president of the historical society in town. Cordelia is friends with Neve Harp, one of the few remaining members of the original founding families of Pluto. The name “Pluto” was chosen for its Greek origins, as several other nearby towns had Greek names. It is only later learned that Pluto is the name of the god of the underworld. Cordelia finds it ironic that the town of Pluto is the most isolated and least friendly town in the solar system of nearby towns.

Cordelia recounts how, in 1911, a family of five – including a teenage girl and two young boys – were murdered, with the only survivor being a baby. In 1928, Cordelia recounts, the owner of Pluto's National Bank fled the country for Brazil with most of the town's money, but was persuaded to return. The president's brother restored the bank and took over after the returned president killed himself, Cordelia recalls. The brother is Murdo Harp. Cordelia and Neve visit with one another regularly, and take long walks. They speak about the history of the town, and how stamp collecting was once a craze. Neve explains her own brother, Evelina's father, once collected stamps but lost his collection. To this day, those who know of the 1911 murders still wonder who was truly responsible. Cordelia believes it was someone other than Tobek.

It is revealed then that Cordelia is the baby who survived the murder. Cordelia recalls a patient she saw many years before, a man named Warren Wolde whose leg was trampled by a bull. Cordelia reveals that Warren gave her a terrifying look when he first saw her. Many years later, Cordelia explains she learned that Warren died and had left her a huge sum of cash – the same kind of dollar bills that had been mysteriously given to her all her life by an unknown person. Cordelia explains she learned that Warren died when a visitor named Corwin Peace played his violin at the state asylum where Warren spent his later years. Cordelia believes Warren was the murderer. Cordelia goes on to explain that, as the Pluto Historical Society now consists of only her and Neve, and as the number of subscriptions to their newsletter has dwindled, the society and newsletter



are now declared defunct. She explains that the town of Pluto will turn to dust based on the decisions that men have made, for the devils have risen up to claim them based on those choices.

Analysis

Evelina's belief that she may be a lesbian is not welcomed by Corwin, not because he has anything against lesbians, but because he is in love with Evelina. Corwin's life, which has not been fated by his poor choices, is reflective of Evelina's life that she is not bound to heartbreak after Nonette. Through the gentleness of Corwin, Evelina finally comes around to him. Through their marriage, the interconnectedness and blood connections of the town continues. This means there will be yet more history to Pluto. Yet, it is history already made into which Judge Coutts plunges. He recalls a sexual affair with a much older woman he refers to as "C" – an affair he willingly participated in as a matter of choice.

"C", as the reader learns, turns out to be Cordelia Lochern, the sole survivor of the 1911 murder. Coutts learns that Cordelia was a doctor who refused to treat Indian patients. Early on, C certainly believed that Indians were responsible for the murder of her family, evidenced by her refusal to treat Indians. This racism is only understood in context of the murders, and as Coutts – who is part Indian himself – comes to acknowledge, this isn't racism at all, but history.

Mooshum's vision of the doves portends two more deaths. The first death is that of Warren Wodle. Wolde is revealed to be the crazy uncle of Marn. Wolde, who has gone crazy for whatever reason –perhaps based on psychological trauma from serving in the military –is responsible for the murder of Cordelia's family. Various kinds of evidence, such as the cash payments, are discussed by Cordelia, but it is Wolde's reaction to Cordelia when being treated for a farm injury that convinces her. Cordelia bears a striking resemblance to her mother and sister –something Warren Wolde recognizes and recoils from. Violin music was playing when Warren killed Cordelia's family, and is played by Corwin at the institute, signaling Warren's death. Cordelia and Corwin are not bound to what many perceive to be fate in town, but are bound by their own life choices –as was Warren and as were the members of the lynch mob.

The second death foretold by the doves is that of the town of Pluto itself. It is poetically fitting that Cordelia should survive the darkness and murders carried out by residents of the town to see the town itself die. As she notes, the town was unwittingly named for the Greek god of the underworld. Yet even this did not mean the town was destined to be doomed. The evil that men do does not come from the place in which they live, but from their hearts.

Cordelia predicts the fate of the town of Pluto to be nothing more than dust. There is a strong Biblical element here in the town, like people, being raised up from dust and returning to dust. The people of the town of Pluto had a chance to live their lives well, but many chose not to do so – meaning the devils have risen to claim them. But



because of the evil that people do which makes a town corrupt morally, the town – and the people – cannot survive. The town's fate is not a question of fate itself, but the choices of men.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Cordelia so insistent upon collecting the town's history along with Neve? What do both women hope this will accomplish?

Discussion Question 2

What evidence is there to suggest that Warren Wolde is the murderer of Cordelia's family? How does Cordelia herself feel about this, and the murder and lynchings in general?

Discussion Question 3

Does Cordelia believe Pluto is bound by fate? Why or why not? How does she feel about her own life? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

hiatus, unsanitary, aversion, solemnize, maudlin, restorative, clandestine, unobtrusively, philately



Characters

Evelina

Evelina is one of the narrators of the novel. Evelina is half-white, half Ojibwe Indian, and 12 when the novel begins. It is through her that much of the past about the 1911 murder and lynchings is revealed through the stories that her grandfather, Mooshum, hands down.

Evelina is a sweet, naïve, and pretty girl who expects life to be uncomplicated, romantic, and pleasant, but learns this is not always the case. Evelina is deeply disturbed by the murders and lynchings, and never looks at her town or her neighbors in the same way again. Her first kiss with Corwin is made confusing by her bisexuality, and she later has a lesbian relationship with Nonette while Evelina trains at the state mental hospital during college. Evelina ultimately comes to marry Corwin, and is forever unable to forget the truth about her hometown.

Corwin

Corwin Peace is the half-white descendant of the Peace Indian brothers who first led white explorers to the area in which Pluto is now located. He is the son of Maggie Peace and John Wildstrand, and the nephew of Billy Peace. Corwin is thrilled by his first kiss with Evelina, and falls in love with her as a result.

Corwin ultimately drops out of school, gets into drugs, and steals Shamengwa's violin to pawn for drug money. Corwin is caught, and ordered to take violin lessons with Shamengwa rather than being sent to jail. Corwin becomes a masterful violinist, cleans up his act, and reconnects with Evelina. He visits Evelina at the state hospital, where he plays his violin for her, unwittingly sending Warren Wolde to death. Corwin later proposes to, and marries Evelina.

Mooshum

Mooshum is the Native American grandfather of Evelina, and the brother of Shamengwa. Mooshum is the sole survivor of the 1911 retaliatory lynchings conducted by a mob from Pluto for the murder of the Lochern family. Mooshum is haunted by the near-death experience throughout his life, though he is able to live comfortably in spite of it by taking comfort in his family and in the theological arguments he has with Father Cassidy.

Mooshum later visits the tree where he almost died with Evelina to pay his respects. Because of his near-death experience, Mooshum has visions of doves that often portend death, or serve as metaphorical of death.



Judge Coutts

Judge Antone Coutts is one of the narrators of the novel. Of mixed white and Indian ancestry, Judge Coutts is descended from one of the first settlers of Pluto. Coutts believes deeply in God, free will, and lives his life in reflection of the writings of Marcus Aurelius which urge men on to greatness in their lives. Coutts is a fair and just man who would rather see someone like Corwin reformed than imprisoned, and a man who is hopelessly romantic as evidenced by his relationships with Cordelia and then Geraldine, the latter of whom he later marries. Coutts makes the very astute observation that everything that happens in Pluto is connected by blood. As the town judge, he has special knowledge of the activities and history of the town, which he provides to give better context to the plot of the novel.

Shamengwa

Shamengwa is the brother of Mooshum. Shamengwa is devoutly Catholic, and is a masterful violinist. He owns and plays the violin that once belonged to the Peace brothers, who inherited it from the first French settlers to the area. Shamengwa comes to tutor and instruct Corwin in the playing of the violin after Corwin attempts to pawn the violin for drug money. Shamengwa helps turn Corwin's life around, and creates a master violinist in Corwin. When Corwin's skill rivals Shamengwa's own, Shamengwa passes away.

Cordelia Lochren

Cordelia Lochren is one of the narrators of the novel. Cordelia is the sole survivor of the 1911 murder that claims the lives of her mother, her father, her sister, and her two brothers. For many years, Cordelia believes hearsay that Indians were responsible, so as a doctor, she refuses to treat Indians and lives alone. She later comes to learn that Indians were not responsible for the murders, has a sexual affair with Judge Coutts, and then marries a man named Ted.

Cordelia is witness to the town's ultimate decline, and comes to serve on the historical society. Cordelia comes to believe that Warren Wolde is actually responsible for the murders, based on various pieces of circumstantial evidence.

Warren Wolde

Warren Wolde is the uncle of Marn Wolde, and a patient at the state mental hospital where Evelina works. A military veteran and farmer who goes crazy (perhaps as a result of the horrors experienced during war), Warren comes to be Cordelia's chief suspect in the slaying of her family. Warren anonymously sends cash to Evelina throughout her life, and upon his death, leaves a massive quantity of cash to her. Warren dies when Corwin plays the violin while at the institution, whereas his killing of Cordelia's family



occurred while violin music was playing on the gramophone. Warren's crazed babblings allude to being able to sense death, and amount to his insisting that he will "kill them all." Additionally, Warren is startled when Cordelia treats one of his farm injuries, for she so closely resembles her mother and sister.

Billy Peace

Billy Peace is the brother of Maggie Peace, and the uncle of Corwin Peace. Billy is enraged when John Wildstrand impregnates Maggie, and concocts a kidnapping scheme with him to gather money to care for his sister and Corwin. The plan backfires, but Billy is protected by John.

Billy goes into the ministry to redeem himself, when he meets and marries Marn Wolde. Billy ultimately becomes fanatical and abusive, forming a compound for his religious followers and rarely ever allowing anyone to leave. Billy is ultimately killed by Marn so that she and their children may escape.

Sister Mary Anita

Sister Mary Anita is a nun at Saint Joseph's Convent and teaches school in Pluto. A descendant of one of the lynchers, Sister Anita has devoted her life to God in part to atone for that past. Sister Mary Anita suffers from a protruding jaw, giving her the nickname "Godzilla" among her students.

Evelina comes to develop a crush on Sister Anita, though Sister Anita is entirely unaware of this. Sister Anita provides evidence of the fact that people are not bound to the drama and tragedies so common in Pluto, but have the ability to rise above it and do better with their lives.

Eugene Wildstrand

Eugene Wildstrand is one of the members of the mob that seeks revenge on the murderer of the Locherns in 1911. Descended from the town's founders, Eugene at first believes Holy Track, Mooshum, Opin, and Asiginak to be responsible, but has an awakening of conscience nearly all the way through the hangings. He cuts down Mooshum and prevents Mooshum from being killed.

Symbols and Symbolism

Doves

For Mooshum, the doves represent flight and freedom, revealed by his decision to run off with Junesse rather than become a priest. But for the town as a whole, the doves come to symbolize bad luck and misfortune. Their scouring of the landscape and crops – destroying life – serves as a symbolic precursor of the lives the residents themselves will be taking soon, both in the murders and the subsequent lynchings. The doves also come to serve as harbingers for the eventual demise of the town. As the town declines late in the novel, Mooshum has a vision of doves, portending the death of the town.

Violin

Mooshum's violin that he hands down to Corwin symbolizes a kind of freedom that does not require running or physically moving, but a freedom of the heart, mind, and soul through violin music. A violin is kept and played by Mooshum, who ultimately hands it down to Corwin after he trains Corwin following his plot to pawn the violin for drug money. The violin, as it is later revealed, was first brought to the area by the earliest French explorers, where it was handed down through the generations to the Peace brothers. It ultimately came into Shamengwa's possession when Henri Peace sets the violin out in a canoe in the lake that climbed the life of his brother twenty years before.

Violin music

Violin music symbolizes death in the novel, as it is playing during murders, death, and near-death experiences. Violin music is first heard on the gramophone during Warren's murdering of the Lochern family. Violin music is later heard whenever Shamengwa and Corwin play. The creation of violin music can be seen as saving and freeing, as the music plays when Cordelia is saved by a malfunctioning gun and as Warren later dies while Corwin plays at the state hospital. Corwin himself redeems his life for his bad past behavior through freeing himself in the violin music that he creates.

The tree

The tree is located on Wolde family land, is where the lynchings of 1911 take place, and is symbolic not only of death, but peace and freedom. A mob of men, including many prominent members of the founding families of the community, head there with Mooshum, Holy Track, Opin, and Aiginak where all four are hanged. At the last moment, Eugene Wildstrand cuts down Mooshum to save his life in a moment of clarity and conscience. As Evelina later notes, everyone in the community knows where "the tree" is located. She and Mooshum visit the tree to pay their respects to the dead, and so Mooshum can leave Holy Track's boots behind. At the tree, Mooshum has a vision of



doves which alternately suggests peace and freedom for the dead, and death for the town.

Boots

Boots modified with crosses affixed to the soles are worn by Holy Track, and symbolize the presence of God. The imprints they make in the ground earn him the nickname “Holy Track”. Holy Track’s mother believes that the tracks mean misfortune and evil will not follow him. Unfortunately, the evil of men prevails against the intent of God and Holy Track’s mother, in which time Holy Track is scapegoated and lynched. Mooshum keeps the boots, and later has Evelina throw them into the tree. It takes her three symbolic attempts to do so –one for each of the dead. The three attempts may also symbolically be seen to represent the Holy Trinity of the Catholic Church –the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit –and the fact that Holy Track and the others are now in the presence of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit in Heaven.

Stars

Stars are referenced in Billy’s local sermon which wins the heart of Marn, and symbolize the idea that each individual life matters. Billy’s sermon about God and the stars indicates that stars are the eyes of God, and there is a star for each person in the world. This underscores the idea that each individual life matters to God and to events in the world. No one is worthless, and everyone has an impact. This is the case in Pluto, and reinforces Coutts’s belief in free will as being the determining factor in human life. That God pays attention to each individual person means that each person is responsible for his or her own life and therefore, life choices. If everything was fated, God would not be paying attention –He would not need to.

Warren's predictions

Warren’s predictions all concern death. They are thought to be the ramblings of a mad man, except by Marn due to the visions that she herself has. Warren predicts that Marn will kill someone, which she later does by way of Billy to free herself and her children from his control. Warren, having murdered the Lochern family, now presumably can sense death around him, such as was the case with Marn. In the hospital, Warren’s mind misfires, causing him to tell those around him he will “kill them all”. This is in direct reference to his killing of all of the Locherns. This means that Warren had intended to kill the Locherns before he did –but for what reason is never truly revealed, though it can be argued that psychological trauma from military service deeply affected him.

Cash

Cash symbolizes guilt in the novel. Cash is saved and given to Cordelia throughout her life by Warren, though Warren does so anonymously. It is believed that Warren does



this out of regret and remorse. When Warren dies, a massive amount of cash in small denominations is given to Cordelia at Warren's request. This is among the pieces of evidence which allow Cordelia to conclude that Warren is the true murderer of her family.

The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius

The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius are a set of collected writings, philosophical musings, advice, and exhortations to readers to live their lives justly and fully that were written by Roman military commander and future emperor, Marcus Aurelius. The Meditations are kept and read by Joseph J. Coutts, one of the original explorers and settlers of Pluto. The Meditations are later discovered by Judge Coutts, and become an important influence on his life.

Pluto Historical Society newsletters

The Pluto Historical Society newsletters symbolize the gradual death of a small town, as it's residents die off and no one replaces them. The newsletters are written and produced by the Pluto Historical Society. The writings of the newsletter come to serve as the actual content of the novel. The final members of the Historical Society turn out to be Cordelia and Neve, who ultimately decide to discontinue the newsletter and society after the town population declines dramatically. It is hoped the newsletters will provide a testament to the lives of a people and a town that will ultimately cease to exist.



Settings

Pluto

Pluto is a small town in rural North Dakota that borders the Ojibwe Indian Reservation. Pluto is founded in the 1800s by a group of white and Indian settlers who unwittingly name the town after the Greek god of the underworld due to the prominence of Greek-named towns in the area.

Pluto, Judge Coutts notes in the novel, is a town where everything is connected by blood. The founding families, and the successive families that come to the area, all intermarry over and over again with each other, and with the local Indians. The town is small enough where this is possible, but also large enough to have its own bank, schools, shops, diners, and historical society. In 1896, a massive swarm of doves descends upon the town, portending the town's future demise and the murders of the Locherns and the Indians scapegoated for the killing 17 years later.

Pluto is where the majority of the novel takes place, and is where many of the characters live and work – including Judge Coutts, Evelina, Mooshum, and others. The town is overshadowed by the lynchings, and due to the corrupted nature of most of its citizens, slowly declines and begins to die over time. By the end of the novel, the town is in death throes, with hardly any descendent members of the original founding families still alive.

Ojibwe reservation

The Ojibwe reservation is located alongside the towns of Pluto, Hoopdance, and Argus. Predominantly rural, the reservation is home to the Ojibwe Indian tribe, Evangeline, and her family. The reservation is sustained by, and helps to sustain the three towns around it. The boundaries of the reservation have become vague and blurred by the encroachment of Pluto, and the number of intermarriages between whites and Indians.

The only time the boundaries of the reservation truly matter in the novel is when, in 1911, the mob seeking revenge for the murder of the Locherns scapegoat Mooshum and his group of friends. The peace that had existed before, and largely after, was terrifyingly interrupted during the event, setting sharp boundaries once more between the Ojibwe and the residents of Pluto.

Wolde family land

Wolde family land is located near the Ojibwe Indian reservation. The Wolde family land is infamous both for it serving as the location of the 1911 lynching, and the religiously-fanatic compound constructed by Billy and his followers decades later. Evelina and her



grandfather later visit the Wolde family land to see the tree where Mooshum was almost hanged in order to pay their respects to the dead.

Lochren Farm

The Lochren farm is where the Lochren family lived and was murdered by Warren Wolde in 1911. The farm is visited by Asiginak, Holy Track, Mooshum, and Opin when Asiginak and Holy Tack travel there to deliver baskets. There, they discover that one member of the Lochren family, the baby Cordelia, has miraculously survived. After they leave the farm, the four Indians are relentlessly pursued by a mob with the goal of lynching them.

State mental institute

The state mental institute is where Warren Wolde is committed, and where Evelina later comes to carry out a work-study program for college. The institute is where Evelina meets and then falls in love with patient Nonette, and where Evelina later has her heart broken when Nonette leaves. Eveline suffers a breakdown and is herself temporarily committed to the institute. She is visited by Corwin, who plays the violin for her. It is during this visit that Warren hears the violin's music, and dies.



Themes and Motifs

Death as an inescapable part of daily life

Death is an inescapable part of daily life as Louise Erdrich argues in her novel “The Plague of Doves.” Death comes in many ways in the novel, including both literal and symbolic, and overshadows the lives of the town of Pluto and its residents. Death also forms a core, driving element of the plot, and establishes a mystery, a tragedy, and a cause for redemption - something the citizens of Pluto must constantly live with.

In 1896, the plague of doves which descends on Pluto and the surrounding area scours the land and destroys crops and livelihoods. The doves symbolically and literally represent death to the residents of the area as a result. The doves symbolically portend not only the ultimate demise of the town itself, but the Lochern murders and lynchings which follow seventeen years later. In 1911, an unknown assailant, later revealed to probably be Warren Wolde, brutally slaughters the Lochern family. There is only one survivor, the baby Cordelia.

A local mob, including prominent citizens and descendants of the town’s founding families, sets out to seek revenge. They scapegoat Mooshum and his group of friends only because they are Indians, awakening age-old hatreds that had until then largely been done away with. Mooshum’s friends are subsequently horrifically murdered by hanging, with Mooshum himself narrowly escaping death when Eugene Wildstrand intervenes.

The deaths of the Locherns and the innocent Indians hang over the town like a shadow, especially when more and more citizens awaken to the fact that the lynchings were unjustified. Some, like Sister Mary Anita, seek redemption in their lives by turning to God to atone for the actions of their ancestors. Others, like Neve Harp and later Cordelia herself, seek to uncover the absolute truth about the events. Still others, like Evelina’s mother, continue to hold understandable grudges against those responsible for the lynchings.

Upon learning about the deathly past of the town of Pluto, Evelina herself no longer can feel very kindly toward her neighbors and friends, for their ancestors were part of an unjust killing. Likewise, the poor, immoral, and dishonest choices the residents of Pluto make ultimately doom the town. By the end of the novel, Pluto is in its death throes. Cordelia notes that men choose to do evil and raise up devils, and that as a result, their town will turn to dust.



Religion and spirituality are essential in the lives and history of the citizens of Pluto

Religion and spirituality are essential in the lives and history of the citizens of Pluto in the novel "The Plague of Doves" by Louise Erdrich. Religion generally posits belief in a higher power (usually God) or order, and includes organized forms of religion as well as theological matters of faith, while spirituality accepts there is an unseen, immaterial world and order to things, which may or may not include belief in a higher power. In the novel, religion and spirituality are seen to have a mostly positive impact on the lives and actions of characters, but also have a darker side.

The first French explorers to the place that one day becomes Pluto, North Dakota, are devoutly Catholic. In addition to exploration, the French leave their religion behind. While some natives balk at the religion, others embrace it. By the time the Peace brothers lead the first settlers to the site that will be named Pluto, many local Indians have become devoutly Catholic, while retaining and fusing their native spirituality to their religious understanding. While dreams and visions are important in the Catholic faith, for example, they are utterly essential to Ojibwe Indian belief. Evelina and Mooshum, as such, pay careful attention to Mooshum's visions of doves.

Religion and spirituality play a healing role in the lives of Pluto's citizens as well. Catholicism, a Christian religion, places emphasis on the ideas of forgiveness and redemption through the model of Jesus Christ. Sister Mary Anita, a descendant of one of the lynchings, turns to a life in the Church as a way to atone for the sins of her ancestors. Billy, before he becomes fanatical, turns to a life of religion through preaching to atone for his own past in the kidnapping plot and eventual suicide of John Wildstrand. Judge Coutts, who believes in God, redemption, and adheres to the writings of Marcus Aurelius, would rather see Corwin redeem himself and make his life better than go to jail. To help make sense of her life, Evelina even considers life as a nun.

Religion and spirituality can also play a far darker role in daily life as well. As mentioned previously, Billy's Christian preaching turns from genuine passion to abusive fanaticism. He builds a compound on the family property for his followers, and rarely allows anyone the ability to leave. Billy becomes abusive, especially towards his family. Rather than being healing and freeing, religion becomes oppressive and deadly. In order to escape, Marn must kill Billy to flee with her children.

Free will is more influential than fate

Free will is more influential than fate in Louise Erdrich's novel "The Plague of Doves" and while there is strong evidence for fate in the novel, the underlying argument supports free will. Fate is the idea the life and the things which happen in it are predetermined and cannot be avoided, whereas free will is the idea that people make their own decisions, their own choices, and determine their own lives – and that their choices have consequences for them and for others.



As it is explained, the struggle to found Pluto is one fraught with hardship and death. Even the name of the town, unwittingly chosen, has dark connotations. The past violence between whites and Indians seems to imply that the town of Pluto is fated to death and darkness. The murder of the Lochren family, and the subsequent lynching of Holy Track and the others, seems to underscore this point. The poor choices and immoral acts of the descendants of the lynchers only seems to provide further evidence to the idea that the town and its people are doomed.

However, among those who believe in free will is Cordelia – the lone survivor of the Lochren massacre. Cordelia argues that it is up to people to choose to do good or evil, and that their evil choices will raise up devils. In other words, when evil is done, evil follows. When good is done, evil is kept at bay. Regardless as to whether or not the murder of the Lochrens may have been avoided (not as a matter of fate but as a matter of Warren's mental sanity), the lynching of Holy Track and the others could have been avoided. That Eugene Wildtsrand suddenly developed a conscience and saved Mooshum's life just before death evinces the idea that nothing is predetermined. That their descendants had affairs, stole money, and engaged in criminal activity has nothing to do with fate, but everything to do with individual life choices. Their poor choices, not fate, leads to the demise of Pluto.

As Billy explains, Christianity has long held that God pays attention to the lives and actions of each individual person. If fate determined everything, God would have no reason to pay attention. Judge Coutts, who believes in God, redemption, and adheres to the writings of Marcus Aurelius, also believes in human free will. He would rather see Corwin redeem himself and make his life better than go to jail. If redemption were not possible, and if fate ruled the day, it wouldn't matter what Coutts chose to do with Corwin, for Corwin's path would ultimately be set out ahead of him regardless. Corwin, however, is able to come back down the path on which he has been headed toward crime and immorality to redeem himself, clean himself up, and live a good and decent life instead.

History is essential to understanding not only who people are, but what a place is like

History is essential to understanding not only who people are, but what a place is like in "The Plague of Doves" by Louise Erdrich. History – essentially the past of a person, a place, or a group of people, as well as past events, circumstances, and situations – is utterly crucial to the plot of the novel as the past provides context to the present. Indeed, the novel weaves between the present and the past so frequently that it sometimes becomes impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins.

There are three seminal events in the history of the town of Pluto. The first involves the founding of the town in the 1800s. The second involves the 1911 murder of the Lochren family. The third involves the horrific lynching of three innocent Indians as retribution for the Lochren murders. All three events tie together the families and the history of the town. As Judge Coutts notes early on in the novel, there is nothing in the town not



connected by blood. As is noted later, the intertwined histories of the town and its residents become tangled through the murder and the lynchings. Cordelia, who long believed her family was murdered by Indians, as a doctor refused to treat Indians for years.

The mob which unjustly lynches Holy Track, Asiginak, and Opin is formed of many prominent members of the community, including descendants of the founding families of the town who feel a duty to protect their own. The killing has awakened age-old hatred between whites and Indians, which has largely been done away with through friendship and intermarriage. Much distrust between Indians and whites has been simmering once more since 1911, though by the 1960s, is largely forgotten once more. As Cordelia and Evelina come to learn, family history is just as terrible as racism.

Cordelia's family was murdered by Warren Wolde, whose sister, Marn, married Billy Peace. Billy became religiously fanatic, leading to his death at the hands of Marn. Billy's turn to religion in the first place stemmed from the failed kidnapping plot with John Wildstrand to secure money for John's mistress, the young Maggie Peace, sister of Billy. The son John and Maggie have is Corwin, who later marries Evelina and plays the music that kills Warren. John later commits suicide, and his bank is later turned into the diner where Marn and Evelina come to work. Evelina's teacher, Sister Mary Anita, is a descendant of one of the lynchers who has joined the convent to atone for her family's sins, while Evelina comes to care for Warren when he is in the state institution, unaware of who he truly is. It is ultimately revealed that the land on which the lynchings took place belongs to the Woldes.

Race and racism form an integral part of the history and social makeup of Pluto

Race and racism form an integral part of the history and social makeup of Pluto in "The Plague of Doves" by Louise Erdrich. Race – one's skin color and nationality - and prejudice in word and deed against another for his or her skin color and nationality – become crucial to the plot revolving around murder and lynching. In the novel, race matters greatly only briefly.

There are three primary races featured in the novel. The first are the dark-skinned Native American Ojibwe tribe, who live in the North Dakota area. The second are the light-skinned French who explore the area, who bring Catholicism and Western ideas and accoutrements – such as the violin – to the region. The third are the light-skinned American settlers who found towns and set up farms in the area. For the most part, the French and Ojibwe get along well, as do the Ojibwe and the Americans later on. Indeed, while there are racist sentiments that exist between the whites and Indians in the area early on, these do not break out in violence in Pluto's area until 1911. Indeed, the natives and settlers work together to found Pluto and the adjoining Indian reservation, as demonstrated by the Peace brothers serving as guides for the first white American settlers.



Interestingly, the settling Americans and the Native Americans form such bonds of friendship that intermarriage becomes common. While many in both races refuse to intermarry, enough do that the lines between whites and Indians become blurred to the point of being indistinguishable. Half-white, half-Indians like Evelina and Judge Coutts are quite common. Whereas racism and segregation seem to dominate the headlines elsewhere in the country, no such hatreds appear at least on the surface in Pluto.

Racism only becomes an issue for Pluto, truly, in 1911 when the Lochren family is discovered murdered. The killing is so stunning to the people of the town that white citizens automatically assume such a heinous and uncivilized crime could only be possible of Indians – despite the peace and civilized relationship between white and Indians since the founding of the town. The mob that forms finds a convenient set of scapegoats in Holy Track and the others, only because they are Indians. Interestingly enough, not everyone at the time is convinced of this, and believe racism is a cheap and unjust way to bring about justice. The white Sheriff and a white veteran military officer confront the mob and try to stop them but are unsuccessful. Only white Eugene Wildstrand, among all members of the mob, has a last-minute awakening of conscience, in which he saves Mooshum's life.



Styles

Point of View

Louise Erdrich tells her novel “The Plague of Doves” in the first-person omniscient reflective narrative mode, from the points of view of several different characters. These include Evelina, Judge Coutts, Marn Wolde, and Cordelia Lochren. The novel is ultimately revealed to be a collection of firsthand accounts of the history of the town of Pluto, and families who live there by way of the local historical society newsletter. Evelina, Coutts, Marn, and Cordelia write in the first person as they recall their own experiences as well as those of their families. Their writing assumes both present and past-tense form that alternates and sometimes mixes.

The narrative is both reflective and omniscient, as the events being written about are being described years later, and are nearly all known. The use of past tense language, as well as the thoughts, considerations, and analysis of those events by the individual narrating are emblematic of reflection. For example, on page 134, Judge Coutts recalls asking John Wildstrand what went through his mind during his affair and kidnapping plot years before. Coutts recounts that Wildstrand, at the time, looked back on things and noted that he had detected a “shiver of possibility” for all the things that might be – a reflection on an event years after it had occurred.

Language and Meaning

Louise Erdrich tells her novel “The Plague of Doves” in language that is poetic, descriptive, and reflective. Because the novel assumes the form of firsthand written accounts of the past in a historical society newsletter, it only makes sense that the use of past-tense language and retrospective consideration be used. For example, on page 243, Evelina recalls contemplating the history of the town and its families while committed to the institution. Given the deeply spiritual and religious nature of the work, as well as the importance of free will and romance, the poetic and descriptive aspect of the language is crucial. For example, on page 142, Billy likens the attention God pays people to the stars in the sky – a point both poetic in visual composition and descriptive in nature of the importance of free will. On page 157, the rain is described as “harsh silver curtains of water,” which not only visually describe the rain in poetic detail, but describes in poetic tragedy the prison-like situation in which Marn is living in the compound.

Structure

Louise Erdrich divides her novel “The Plague of Doves” into nine major parts, and each part into numerous unnumbered, titled chapters, and titled and untitled subsections. The major parts, with the exception of the very first (“Solo”), are told from the point of view of either Evelina, Judge Coutts, Marn Wolde, or Cordelia Lochren. “Solo” is told in the

third-person narrative mode by an unknown narrator, and details briefly the murder of the Lochrens. The events told in the respective sections of the first-person narrators are their firsthand accounts of the history of their families and the town. These parts are divided into titled chapters, with the contents of each chapter referring in some way to the title. For example, the chapter “Town Fever” details the efforts of Judge Coutt’s ancestor’s desire to leave town and found a new one. Within that chapter, smaller sections, such as “The Expedition” serve as integral to the overall chapter, but can stand on their own as chapters as well. “The Expedition” recounts the journey that Coutt’s ancestor made to the site that would become the town of Pluto. Some chapters, such as “The Wolf” have no subsections, whereas other chapters, like “Satan: Hijacker of a Planet” contain numerous untitled subsections.



Quotes

I had expected to feel joy but instead felt a confusion of sorrow, or maybe fear, for it seemed that my life was a hungry story and I its source, and with this kiss I had now begun to deliver myself into the words.

-- Evelina (Story)

Importance: As Evelina begins her own story, she reflects on her first kiss with Corwin. Evelina had hoped that this kiss would bring great joy, but instead, it brings uncertainty and a yearning for something more. In many ways, Evelina's first kiss is reflective of the human life. People expect their lives to be full of joy and happiness, but always end up being confusing and full of yearning as well. This is also certainly true of all the people who live in Pluto.

The devil has this place.

-- Asiginak (The Lochren Farm)

Importance: When Asiginak, Mooshum, Holy Track, and Opín stumble across the Lochren farm, Asiginak states that the devil has the place given the terrible murder. The murder ends up claiming the lives of Asiginak, Holy Track, and Opín through lynching – and nearly claims Mooshum's life in the same manner. Asiginak's contention is that there is evil in the murder – but this can be extrapolated to the town itself in that there is evil all over the area.

The story Mooshum told us its repercussions – the first being that I could not look at anyone in quite the same way anymore.

-- Evelina (Lines)

Importance: Mooshum relates the events of the murder and the hangings Evelina. Evelina is horrified by the story. All of the people she has grown up knowing – friends, neighbors, and even relatives – no longer appear the same to her in light of the past. It is disturbing to Evelina that people involved in such a past could live their lives so seemingly normal afterwards – and never be brought to justice.

Nothing that happens, nothing, is not connected here by blood.

-- Judge Coutts (The Wolf)

Importance: After the reader learns of the tragedy of the murder and the trauma of the lynching, the reader learns just how truly connected the community of Pluto is. All of the founding and early families are intermarried or connected with one another in some way, shape, or form. Coutts contends very clearly and to the point that nothing that occurs in Pluto occurs without being connected by blood. Family roots – and family crimes and memories – go deep.

The stars are the eyes of God and they have been watching us from the beginning of the earth. Do you think there isn't an eye for each of us? Go on and count.



-- Billy Peace (Satan: Hijacker of a Planet)

Importance: Before Billy becomes fanatical, he is first a genuine preacher of the Word of God. He is well-loved and well-respected. Billy, in the sermon which earns him the love of Marn, explains that stars are the eyes of God, and there is a star for each person. In other words, each individual life matters to God and to events in the world. No one is worthless, and everyone has an impact. This is certainly the case in Pluto.

You're gonna kill.

-- Warren Wolde (The Kindred)

Importance: Death is an important theme in the novel, as are spirituality and religion. Marn's uncle predicts with a spiritual certitude that she will be committing murder. This prophesy is borne out in Marn's killing of Billy when Billy becomes fanatical and abusive. Marn's family land is not alone only in the killing of Billy, but is also the property on which Holy Track and the others were lynched.

Now that I am old and know the ways of grief I understand she felt too much, loved too hard, and was afraid to lose us as she had lost my brother.

-- Shamengwa (The First Fiddle)

Importance: As Shamengwa grows older, he reflects on his life and the importance of things like love. He explains that life is filled with love and grief, and that loss can make one love harder and deeper than before – a kind of love which, when lost, is even more devastating. The losses endured by the residents of Pluto are devastating, meaning that families hunker down and hold onto their own – so a murder, like that of the Lochrens, is stunning.

Freedom, I found, is not only in the running but in the heart, the mind, the hands.

-- Shamengwa (The First Fiddle)

Importance: While many people believe that running away means freedom from Pluto – people such as Corwin – others, like Shamengwa, know otherwise. Freedom isn't found only in running, but in beauty, such as that which comes from playing music. This sort of beauty will set someone free. Corwin comes to learn this as, rather than sending him to jail, Judge Coutts gives Corwin the chance to redeem himself instead.

History works itself out in the living. The Buckendorfs, the other Wildstrands, the Peace family, all of these people whose backgrounds tangled in the hanging.

-- Evelina (Nonette's Bed)

Importance: Evelina, reflecting on her lost love, reflects on the love lost in the past in tragic circumstances in Pluto. While the families that founded Pluto may have been intertwined, the lynching and other crimes mean these families are tangled in one another as well. Disentangling from such a knot is difficult, though not impossible. Evelina and Corwin manage to do this later on. Others, however, can never truly be free of the past, and will forever be haunted by it – such as Cordelia.



You and me are supposed to marry. We're supposed to love unto death, until death do us part.

-- Corwin (All Soul's Day)

Importance: Corwin has been in love with Evelina since their first kiss. He is alarmed by the idea that she might be a lesbian not because he has anything against lesbians, but because this would derail his plans to marry her and have a life with her. Corwin encourages Evelina to marry him, telling her that only death can truly separate them. He is genuine and earnest in his love for her, and could not imagine life without her.

Old love, middle love, the kind of love that knows it self and knows that nothing lasts, is a desperate shared wilderness.

-- Judge Coutts (The Veil)

Importance: As Judge Coutts recounts more of his life to the reader, he explains that his love with Geraldine is the greatest, deepest, and truest love he has ever known. He explains that as people get older, they come to value love even more because they know it will not last forever. It then becomes a desperate effort to hold on to all the love one can before it slips away.

The dead of Pluto now outnumber the living.

-- Cordelia Lochren (Disaster Stamps of Pluto)

Importance: Pluto is a dying town. Cordelia, the survivor of the murder of her family many years before, ironically comments that the dead outnumber the living in Pluto. The town is not growing, but fading fast. She expects the town will one day be abandoned. The number of dead has only increased over the past century as murders and lynchings have greatly affected both the town's population, and its consciousness. In other words, death hangs heavy in the minds and hearts of residents, which in turn affects their lives in general and how they see the town and their lives in the town.

The wind will blow. The devils rise. All who celebrate shall be ghosts. And there will be nothing but eternal dancing, dust on dust, everywhere you look.

-- Cordelia Lochren (Disaster Stamps of Pluto)

Importance: Cordelia predicts the fate of the town of Pluto to be nothing more than dust. There is a strong Biblical element here in the town, like people, being raised up from dust and returning to dust. The people of the town of Pluto had a chance to live their lives well, but many chose not to do so – meaning the devils have risen to claim them. But because of the evil that people do which makes a town corrupt morally, the town – and the people – cannot survive.